How to Relate Science and Faith Without Conflict (Part 1)

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By Guest Writer



As someone who has loved both science and Jesus since adolescence, it puzzles me why some people (some Christian, some scientists, and some neither) insist that science and Christianity are in conflict with one another. In my research as a molecular biologist and virologist, I have never found this to be the case. Rather, science and faith have *complemented* one another in my quest to understand truth.

The late Ian Barbour, an American scholar who studied the relationship between science and faith, recognized four ways of relating these two supposed combatants.1Three of the four methods *do not* involve conflict. In this two-part series I will discuss Barbour’s insights, with the hope of demonstrating that conflict is not the default position for science and Christianity.

**Science vs. Scientism**

Barbour defines conflict as the outcome of differing philosophical starting points.2 The conflict between science and religion is best understood as a conflict between materialistic naturalism and biblical literalism, a position that takes Scripture "literalistically" (such as misunderstanding metaphoric phrases and imagery) when other interpretations reflect the meaning of the text more faithfully. The conflict, according to Barbour, occurs from turning a method into a metaphysics (view of reality).3

*Science* is a method employed for studying the natural world’s structure, form, mechanisms, and processes. *Scientism* is a metaphysics that states only the physical, material universe is real. Also known as scientific materialism or materialistic naturalism, scientism rejects categorically the existence of the supernatural, that which lies outside of nature. Scientism makes two fundamental assertions: (1) the scientific method is the only reliable path to knowledge; and (2) matter (or matter and energy) is the fundamental reality of the universe.4

Science is not scientism. Scientism is a *philosophical* commitment that extrapolates science beyond its inherent limits. It then states that that which was being determined scientifically is all that there is to be determined in reality. Although circular and coherent within itself, scientism is not a scientific position. Yet because it incorporates science into its methodology it has great influence in our scientific and technological culture.

If we think about this, it should be apparent that science cannot determine whether the supernatural is real or not since it is a method limited to and employed within the natural realm. Barbour asserts, therefore, that scientific materialism represents “a misuse of science,” as does biblical literalism. Barbour writes, “Both positions fail to observe the proper boundaries of science.”5

Barbour offers the following assertion by biologist and Nobel laureate [Jacques Monod](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/medicine/laureates/1965/monod-bio.html)as an example of extrapolating the methods of science beyond their means to a philosophical statement enmeshed in scientism:

He [Monod] says that science proves there is no purpose in the cosmos. Surely it would be more accurate to say that science does not deal with divine purposes; it is not a fruitful concept in the development of scientific theories.6

It is, however, a concept in the development of a worldview. Yet there is no more*scientific* merit or support for scientism than there is for the view that both the natural and supernatural exist. These two worldviews are mutually exclusive and it is this which lies at the heart of the conflict between scientism and Christianity.

A commitment to scientism leads by necessity to naturalistic reductionism, which asserts if all that exists is matter and energy, then all should be explained by fundamental physics and chemistry and the laws governing these within the universe. Yet scientists and philosophers (of non-theistic persuasion) have wondered about the inherent order within nature as well as its logical functioning. Albert Einstein, Antony Flew, and many others have been deeply and irreparably puzzled by the question, why is there something rather than nothing? This is a question that Barbour would categorize as a “boundary question.”7 Boundary questions are queries that science raises and yet lacks the ability to answer.

How, then, might we relate science and Christianity without resorting to the conflict method? Barbour offers three alternatives (one I will discuss here, the other two in a later article). The first of the three alternatives is independence.  
  
**Independence**

Evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould, best known for the theory of punctuated equilibrium, believed that science and religion should be considered as two distinct domains of knowledge, thus popularizing the acronym NOMA (non-overlapping magisteria).

My observations have convinced me that many of my fellow scientists function under this practical position of non-overlapping domains. Separating science and faith might be practical and functional much of the time; however, this approach can lead to minimizing one or the other and can impede a coherent view of reality. As Barbour puts it, independence often leads to a false dichotomy, one that states that nature can be known by unaided human reason and observation and that God can be known only by revelation through scripture or tradition.8

This dichotomy fails to recognize that natural theology always held that God could be known through rational arguments—based in human reason and observation—and from evidence such as design in nature (physical laws, an orderly universe, etc.). Galileo, in fact, held that God is revealed through both the book of nature and the book of Scripture and that the two books could not conflict since they both came from God.9

I agree with Galileo and would add that science and Christian theology should not conflict since they both seek what is true about reality. Where they touch on truth and reality they should dialogue, harmonize, and even integrate.

This leaves us with the remaining two ways that Barbour categorizes the relationship of science and religion, which we’ll consider in part 2.

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Guest Writer

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References:

1. Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997). Barbour trained in theology at Yale University and in physics at the University of Chicago, and wrote extensively in the area of science and religion.
2. Ibid., “Biblical Literalism,” section 4.I.2, pages 77–105.
3. Ibid.
4. The first assertion is an epistemological statement and the second is a metaphysical or ontological statement. Both are philosophical, not scientific, statements. Neither can be scientifically proven.
5. Barbour, “Biblical Literalism,” 77–105.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.